

GREETINGS FROM SENATOR LINDA EVANS PARLETTE

Weekly E-mail Update

WASHINGTON STATE 12TH LEGISLATIVE DISTRICT



July 8, 2005

Hello again. I hope you are enjoying summer so far. My husband, Bob, and I are gearing up for this month's cherry harvest. Like so many others who are harvesting their crops in our region, it's a busy time filled with long days. That said, things are looking good and I look forward to a successful harvest.

I hope you and your family had a fun and safe Fourth of July weekend. While we all know that the Fourth is a time for food and fireworks, it's also a time to celebrate America's birthday (229 this year!) and to take a moment to appreciate the freedom and democracy that our Founding Fathers helped provide our great nation. Let's also remember those people serving in our United States military, both here and abroad, who protect our freedom and rights.

Recent meetings and events

The legislative interim usually is a busy time for me, and June was no exception. Below is a list of meetings and events I attended last month:

June 13: The Chelan County PUD Board presentation. My assistant, Shiloh Burgess, also attended the meeting, as well as the tour of the BeeBe Springs project site.

June 14: Featured guest on KPQ's "A Matter of Opinion" talk show with host Rhona Baron. We discussed several issues.

June 16: The Washington Policy Center health care conference where I was a speaker on a legislative panel.

June 21: Joint Legislative Task Force on Mental Health Services and Financing meeting and I attended an Interagency Committee (IAC) meeting on Senate Bill 6242, which analyses statewide land acquisitions. I prime sponsored this measure in 2003.

June 22: Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee (JLARC) meeting in SeaTac. Among the issues the committee discussed was a report on the Department of Natural Resources Fire Suppression Study. (More on that study below.)

June 23: I met with Superintendent of Public Instruction Terry Bergeson while she was in Wenatchee for a Summer Institute at Wenatchee High School. About 600 people attended. That day I also attended an Upper Columbia Salmon Recovery Board meeting.

June 24: Wenatchee Valley College welcoming reception for the college's new president, Jim Richardson.

June 29: Senate Ways and Means Committee and Joint Legislative Task Force on Unemployment Insurance Benefit Equity in Olympia.

June 30: Rainer Park dedication in Chelan.

JLARC does DNR Fire Suppression Study

As I mentioned earlier, the June 22 JLARC meeting included a JLARC report on the Department of Natural Resources Fire Suppression Study. Since most of the 12th District is in wildfire country, I was very interested in this report. It included some very worthwhile questions and answers:

Is there one thing driving expenditure increases?

No single factor is causing spending to rise for fire suppression. But increasing costs are closely tied to the number of acres burned. So when conditions are ripe for wildfires and they do burn

more acres, policymakers can expect expenditures to go up.

Who pays for fighting forest fires?

Most of DNR's funding to fight fires comes from the state general fund. But DNR also receives funding from landowner fees and recovers costs from landowners who through their negligence start fires.

Federal agencies reimburse DNR when it helps suppress fires on federal land. This relationship is growing in importance, but tracking reimbursements is cumbersome. And when DNR reports its annual fire suppression efforts, it does not include fires on federal land.

Can DNR control costs even if more acres burn?

DNR is taking steps to control costs. For instance, DNR tries to set rates for services before engaging those services – a basic and necessary first step in controlling costs.

The agency, however, will continue to have difficulty monitoring and controlling its costs without more thorough data gathering and analysis. DNR needs to upgrade financial information systems so that managers can more readily tell what they spent and how much they paid for services as they compare costs and build budgets.

Why are supplemental budgets so big?

Supplemental budget requests for fire suppression are almost guaranteed because of the unpredictability of fire seasons. One lightning storm can make a fire season severe and expensive. A single, well-timed rain storm can significantly reduce a fire season's severity and cost.

Nevertheless, we believe DNR can develop a more consistent budget by relying on more predictable information. For instance, DNR could review the costs of fighting small fires separately from the costs associated with fighting large fires.

JLARC recommendations

The JLARC study recommended that DNR undertake the following short- and long-term strategies to help the Legislature and the agency itself better understand wildland fire fighting costs:

1. Provide more complete information on all fires, including those where DNR participates in suppressing fires on federal land;
2. Meet statutory requirements for public/private cost comparisons;
3. Update and upgrade financial systems to include information on unit costs and units used;
4. Enhance the accuracy of budgeting by using more reliable categories such as fire size or management complexity, and encourage policymakers to consider fire suppression and pre-suppression budgets together;
5. Standardize agreements with local fire districts; and
6. Include all costs associated with the helicopter program in the pre-suppression budget, and develop a prospective rate methodology for the helicopter program.

To see the entire report, go to JLARC's Web site at <http://jlarc.leg.wa.gov>. On the right column, under JLARC Reports – June 2005, click on Department of Natural Resources Fire Suppression Study – 05-11 Final Report.

If you have any ideas, comments or suggestions for me during the interim, please share them with me. I like to hear from people in the district. Enjoy the rest of July!

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